

VZCZCXRO9816
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #0998/01 0920829
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 010829Z APR 08
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6581
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000998

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/30/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [MOPS](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: PM'S ADVISORS DISCUSS BASRAH EXIT STRATEGY

Classified By: Political-Military Counselor Ambassador Marcie Ries for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In separate March 30 conversations with S/I Satterfield and Polmilcouns, both National Security Advisor Muwaffaq al-Rubaie and Political Advisor Sadiq Rikabi acknowledged the seriousness of the current crisis facing PM Maliki and the need to provide him with a face-saving exit but worried that Maliki did not understand the seriousness of his predicament. Rikabi outlined a plan to have the ISF take a Basrah neighborhood and then the port of Um Qasr to provide Maliki with a victory. Rubaie initially dismissed the idea but later seemed to endorse it. Rikabi and Rubaie outlined parallel negotiation tracks with OMS in Najaf and Sadr in Iran although neither could offer much detail on recent Iranian/Iraqi/Kurdish talks in Sulaymaniyah. Rikabi was relatively optimistic about Maliki's political future but Rubaie worried that the PM had suffered "a fatal blow." Rubaie linked the Basrah offensive to Maliki's "impulsive nature" and said he was provoked by reports on the abuse of women in Basrah. Rikabi did not think Basrah Gov. Waeli had the popular support necessary to form Basrah into a region. End Summary.

Maliki's current predicament and political future

¶2. (C) Rikabi and Rubaie both worried that PM Maliki did not understand the gravity of the situation. "We are working to convince him," said Rikabi. Rubaie explained that Maliki "doesn't like bad news," adding that Iraq's generals were military officers under Saddam and avoided delivering negative messages to their leadership. Rubaie said the PM told him he "hadn't thought" about when to return to Baghdad, adding "we will see in two or three days." Rikabi said Sami al-Askari would stay in Basrah until the PM returned to Baghdad.

¶3. (C) Both advisors commented that a military victory was impossible and that even Saddam Hussein could not control Basrah's neighborhoods. The solution, they said, was to give the PM a graceful way out of the predicament. Rikabi said that PM Maliki "needed to achieve something tangible and leave." He added that ISF was currently operating in Hyyaniyah and "hopefully tomorrow they go to liberate Um Qasr." Later, Rikabi expanded on this plan and offered three objectives for the GOI in Basrah: 1) Taking Um Qasr to provide the PM with a victory; 2) Killing or arresting criminal elements; 3) Using ISF operations to send "a strong message" to the Sadrists that they cannot oppose the government. Rubaie was more candid, saying that Maliki needed an "artificial success and face-saving formula." "Frankly," he added, "if Maliki comes back having failed he will be doomed, and our progress will be difficult to sustain." He initially dismissed the plan to go into Hyyaniyah and Um Qasr, but near the end of the meeting referred to the same plan as a way for Maliki to leave Basrah with his image intact.

¶4. (C) Rikabi was relatively optimistic over the PM's political future, saying that Maliki's political situation is "not too bad" because the main parties, including the UIA, the Kurds, and even the Sunnis, realize that "the price of defeat will be paid by all of Iraq." Rubaie was less sanguine, responding that "absolutely, the knives will be out" on the PM's return to Baghdad and musing that Maliki may have suffered "a fatal blow."

Political solution to crisis?

¶5. (C) Rikabi and Rubaie outlined complementary but separate negotiation tracks between the GOI and Sadrists. According to Rikabi, Hadi al-Amri (Head of the COR Badr Organization bloc) and Ali al-Adib (head of the COR Dawa bloc) met with Muqtada al-Sadr in Iran on March 29 to secure a statement from Sadr ordering his followers from the streets and condemning criminal elements. In return, the GOI would agree to target only criminal elements rather than the Sadr movement as a whole. Rikabi clarified that Sadr would deny his followers possessed any medium or heavy weapons and in turn would give the GOI permission to target any individuals carrying such weapons. Rikabi said the meeting produced a letter from Sadr to his followers. He said the letter was delivered to Najaf and expected it to be released "soon." (Note: A letter from Sadr outlining nine points for his followers and the government was released shortly after the meetings concluded.) Rubaie likewise said a political agreement was "very possible" and outlined a three-point proposal negotiated with OMS political leadership in Najaf: 1) PM Maliki returns to Baghdad; 2) Sadr orders his followers from the street; 3) OMS and GOI form a joint committee to discuss governance decisions.

BAGHDAD 00000998 002 OF 002

¶6. (C) Neither advisor offered much information on the recent Iranian/Kurdish/Iraqi talks held in Sulaymaniyah. Rubaie said he had not been briefed on the outcome of the talks but added that "to be brutally frank, Iran is the decisive factor in this." Rikabi said the talks centered on three points: 1) Kurdish interests; 2) Iranian interests; 3) Need for the PCNS to meet. Rikabi added that following completion of the talks PM Chief of Staff Tariq Abdullah was returning to Baghdad.

Why Basrah? Why now?

¶7. (C) Asked for the reasons behind PM Maliki's offensive into Basrah, Rubaie shrugged and said "you know his character, he has an impulsive nature." The trigger, he elaborated, seemed to be a series of reports on the abuse of women in Basrah. Rubaie did not know the origin of the reports but said they included daily statistics on the mutilation and killing of women in Basrah. He criticized the reports as alarmist but said that Maliki called a meeting on March 19 and, referring to the reports, said "enough is enough" and announced that the ISF needed to restore control of Basrah. Rubaie said he interjected only once, pointing out that Gen. Mohan had worked closely with MNF-I officials to develop a multi-phase security plan. In response Maliki said he would fire Mohan and IP Chief Jalil and personally oversee the effort to secure the city. According to Rubaie, Maliki's initiative received the support of Minister of State Safa al-Safi, Ali al-Adib, and various ISCI leaders at a General Support Group meeting on March 21. Two days later, Rubaie noted, Maliki traveled to Basrah "with his entourage" to lead the effort.

Role of Gov. Waeli?

¶8. (C) Rikabi accused Gov. Waeli of being linked to Basrah's corruption and violence and predicted that he will not be

elected to serve another term as governor. Rikabi dismissed the possibility that Waeli would exploit the current crisis to press ahead on forming Basrah into a region, saying the governor lacked the necessary popular support.

¶9. (C) Comment: Despite the relative optimism of his comments, Rikabi was clearly anxious and had more difficulty than normal communicating in English. Rubaie was more pessimistic but appeared to derive some sense of personal vindication from the PM's current predicament. Both advisors seemed unsure over the PM's plans or their ability to influence his decisions. End comment.

¶10. (U) Note: S/I Satterfield did not clear on this cable before transmission. End Note.
CROCKER